

Religious Onomastics and their Influence on the Formation of French Toponyms

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Abstract.

The onomastic system of the French language, when examined from a historical perspective, reveals that proper names have been formed since ancient times and have undergone a lengthy process of evolution to the present day. Despite the extensive body of research in onomastics, certain areas remain unexplored, particularly concerning the pragmatic and socio-cultural functions of onomalexes. The study of the interplay between onomastics and culture is both pertinent and essential, as traditional folk spiritual culture encapsulates the historical experience, worldview, and aesthetic values of a people-reflecting their understanding of themselves within the broader context of the world and the universe.

This article explores the role of religious names in the formation of toponyms in the French language. It examines the perspectives of various linguists on the influence of religious nomenclature in shaping geographical names and analyzes the challenges involved in identifying such origins.

The study employs comparative-historical and structural-semantic methodologies to trace the historical development and cultural significance of these toponyms. The findings highlight the enduring impact of religious lexicon in encoding cultural and historical information within geographical naming systems.

Furthermore, the article addresses the semantic complexity of religiously motivated place names and emphasizes that scholarly interpretations in this area often diverge.

The study concludes that the process of creating religiously derived toponyms mirrors the broader diversity in how cultural and historical knowledge is encoded. From a historical perspective, many of these names can be traced back to antiquity, and their etymological analysis often requires long-term, in-depth investigation.

Keywords: Christianity, Temple, Church, Worship, Saint

Релігійна ономастика та її вплив на формування французьких топонімів

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Анотація.

Ономастична система французької мови при розгляді з історичної точки зору виявляє, що власні назви формувалися з давніх часів і пройшли тривалий процес еволюції до наших днів. Незважаючи на великий обсяг досліджень в області ономастики, деякі напрямки залишаються невивченими, особливо що стосуються прагматичних і соціокультурних функцій ономалексем. Вивчення взаємодії ономастики та культури є актуальним і важливим, оскільки традиційна народна духовна культура містить історичний досвід, світогляд та естетичні цінності народу, відображаючи його розуміння себе в ширшому контексті світу та всесвіту.

У статті досліджується роль релігійних назв у формуванні топонімів у французькій мові. У ній розглядаються погляди різних лінгвістів на вплив релігійної номенклатури на формування географічних назв та аналізуються проблеми, пов'язані з виявленням таких витоків.

У дослідженні використано порівняльно-історичні та структурно-семантичні методології для простежування історичного розвитку та культурного значення цих топонімів. Отримані результати підкреслюють тривалий вплив релігійного лексику на кодування культурної та історичної інформації в рамках географічних систем найменувань.

Крім того, у статті розглядається семантична складність релігійно вмотивованих топонімів і наголошується, що наукові тлумачення в цій галузі часто розходяться.

У дослідженні зроблено висновок, що процес створення топонімів релігійного походження відображає ширше розмаїття способів кодування культурних та історичних знань. З історичної точки зору, багато з цих імен можна простежити до давнини, і їх етимологічний аналіз часто вимагає тривалого глибокого дослідження.

Ключові слова: християнство, храм, церква, поклоніння, святий

Introduction.

The onomastic system of the French language, when examined from a historical perspective, reveals that proper names have been formed since ancient times and have undergone a lengthy process of evolution to the present day. Despite the extensive body of research in onomastics, certain areas remain unexplored, particularly concerning the pragmatic and socio-cultural functions of onomalexes. The study of the interplay between onomastics and culture is both pertinent and essential, as traditional folk spiritual culture encapsulates the historical experience, worldview, and aesthetic values of a people-reflecting their understanding of themselves within the broader context of the world and the universe.

Onomastics comprises several branches within linguistics, among which toponymy holds a prominent position. Toponyms, as linguistic designations of geographical entities, serve as markers of human interaction with the environment and function as repositories of archaisms and dialectal features, often reflecting the languages of earlier inhabitants of a region. Geographical names serve as unique vestiges of extinct languages and constitute a significant component of the linguistic heritage of a people, providing valuable insights into historical phonetics, grammar, and word formation processes.

Toponyms not only facilitate the tracing of cultural development among peoples but also influence the evolution of language itself. In the French context, systematic efforts to collect and document toponyms began with the creation of the Cassini map in the eighteenth century. However, during this initial phase, geographical names were compiled for only approximately half of the 182 map sheets (IGN, n.d.). A crucial advancement occurred in the 1870s with the production of topographical dictionaries for about thirty French departments. These dictionaries offered detailed historical accounts of each toponym, often tracing their earliest mentions in medieval texts.

Auguste Longnon (1923) is widely regarded as the founder of scientific toponymy in France, particularly through his seminal work *Les Noms de Lieux de France*. Subsequent scholars, including Albert Dauzat, Charles Rostaing, Ernest Nègre, and Marcel Bodo, expanded upon Longnon's foundational research. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, further contributions to the study of French toponymy were made by researchers such as Marie-Thérèse Morlet, Marianne Mulon, Paul Fabre, Stéphane Jandon, Michel Morvan, Michel Robinet, and others.

Methodology. This study adopts an integrative methodological framework combining comparative-historical and structural-semantic approaches. The analysis is grounded in the theoretical contributions of key scholars in the field, including S. Lejeune Auguste Longnon and others.

Results.

Names related to religious beliefs of people are widely reflected in the toponymy of our planet. The roots of this tradition go deep into ancient history. The name of the city of Babylon, the center of the largest ancient state in Mesopotamia, means "God's door," in honor of the supreme god Marduk. Indian cities Mumbai (Bombay) and Kolkata (Calcutta) are named after the Hindu goddesses Mumba and Kali. The Brahmaputra River, the main tributary of the Ganges, is named in honor of the "son of the god Brahma." Hindus refer to the confluence of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers as Triveni ("the Trinity"), as it is believed that the mythical celestial Saraswati also joins them.

Many ancient Greek colonial cities were named after heroes from Greek mythology: Apollonius, Heraclea, Dioscuria, Hesperides, and others.

The official name of the capital of Thailand, Bangkok, is Krungthep – Mahanakhon - Boworn Ratanakosin - Mahinthara - Ayutthaya - Mahadilokpop – Nopparat - Rajathani - Burirom Udomrajanivey – Mahasathani – Amornpiman - Avatarnsathit - Sakkathatiya - Avisnukarmprasit, which translates to "City of Angels and Immortal Souls, Repository of Jewels, Glorious City of the God Indra, Throne of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, City of Glimmering Temples, Magnificent Palace and Estates of the King, God Vishnu, etc.," meaning "Home of the Gods."

In the Palk Strait, there is a shallow area, and a chain of coral reefs called Adam's Bridge, which separates India from Sri Lanka. According to the beliefs of local Christians and Muslims, the first man, Adam, after being expelled from paradise, stepped onto the land of Sri Lanka and crossed the shallow waters and reefs to the mainland.

In Catholic countries, there are many toponyms containing the prefixes "san-", "sant-", "santa-", and "sent-", which mean "saint." For example, in France, there are many such names as Saint-Germain, Saint-Jacques, Saint-Martin; in Spain – Santiago; in England – Saint George, and so on. Their formation dates back to the Middle Ages. These toponyms came to the New World not only as migrants but also for another reason: researchers often named new objects they encountered after the saint's day on which they were discovered. Additionally, such names were given to new cities built by colonists. As a result, rivers and bays such as the Saint Lawrence River, San Salvador, San Jose, San Francisco, and thousands of similar names were formed. In Oceania, there are islands like Christmas Island and Easter Island, named by Europeans on Christian holidays (Leite de Vasconcelos, 1928).

In Saudi Arabia, there are spiritual centers of the Muslim world – the cities of Mecca (a pre-Islamic toponym meaning "mausoleum") and Medina. In Islam, they are called Umm al-Qura ("mother of all settlements") and Medina Rasul Allah ("city of the messenger of God")

respectively. Medina is also referred to as Medina an-Nabi – "city of the prophet." In Muslim countries, terms such as "grave" – the grave of a saint, "monastery," "shrine" – holy abode, and other religious toponyms derived from these terms are also widely spread.

As in other Muslim countries, Azerbaijan also has numerous toponyms derived from the names of saints and believers. These include the tomb of Momina Khatun, Ashabi-Kahf in Nakhchivan, Imamzade in Ganja, Mir Movsum-aga in Mardakan, the Ateshgah temple in Surakhani, and others.

In 1501, on the religious holiday of the Ascension of Christ, an unusual toponym was created, named after Ascension Island (Ascension), discovered by the Portuguese in the Atlantic Ocean (Dick, 1990). After the island was captured by the British, there was no money in the treasury to maintain the military garrison stationed there. A logical solution was found: the island was granted the status of a military ship and was named "His Majesty's Ship, Anchored on the Edge." It was not until 1881 that the island regained its former status and was renamed Ascension Island (Hough, 2016).

Religion began to influence French toponymy from ancient times, and even today, some toponyms bear traces of the saints worshipped by the Gauls. The Gauls built many temples dedicated to gods and goddesses. Among them, the name Belisaman, the guardian angel likened to Minerva, holds a special place. From this name, the following toponyms emerged: Bellême (Orne), Blesmes (Aisne), Blismes (Nièvre), and its Latin equivalent Ménerbes (Vaucluse) and Manerbe (Calvados) – all stemming from the ancient name Menérb. Lugdunum, the capital of Gaul in the 1st century BC, now known as Lyon, was named after the god Lugus. The towns of Bourbon-l'Archambaud (Allier), Bourbon-Lancy (Saône-et-Loire), and Bourbon-les-Bains (Haute-Marne) were named after the god of warm waters.

A. Lonyon (1923) noted that place names related to the populations settled in the territory of Gaul from the 5th to the 10th centuries are not the only ones that date back to the first half of the Middle Ages in French toponymy. Alongside these names, which generally pertain to civil order, an important place is occupied by names of ecclesiastical, Christian origin. The study of names related to pagan shrines was the subject of one of the chapters dedicated to terms that arose during the Roman rule; in the medieval period, it is only possible to talk about those place names inspired by the Christian Church.

These names can be divided into three categories:

1. The first type of names, borrowed from religious institutions, consists entirely or partially of common words that denote these institutions.
2. Less old, the second type of names recall religious orders established in France.
3. The third category, by far the most significant, includes names associated with various aspects of

Christian worship: memories of the Holy Land, events in religious history, worship of the Deity, mystical names, and, above all, the cult of saints.

The choice of common names used to designate religious establishments has varied over time. An example can be the word "basilica," which underwent phonetic transcription over time and was used in different forms. The word "basilica" was a feminine adjective of Greek origin meaning "royal." This original meaning has been preserved in the word "basoche," which referred to the jurisdiction to which the clerks of the Parliament referred disputes that could arise between them. In the works of Gregory of Tours and in several Merovingian diplomas, where it frequently appears in the forms *basileca* and *baseleca*, the word always retains the meaning of "church," which is why it found its place in the toponymy of France.

In the territory of France, a large number of toponyms derived from the word "basilica" have formed, such as *la Bazoque* (Calvados, Orne) and *Bazoques* (Eure); *la Bazoche-Gouet* (Eure-et-Loir); *Bazoche* (Oise), *Bazoches* (Aisne, Eure-et-Loir, Loiret, Nièvre, Orne, Seine-et-Marne, Seine-et-Oise); *Beton-Bazoches* (Seine-et-Marne); *la Baroche-sous-Lucé* (Orne) and *de la Baroche-Gondouin* (Mayenne); *Bazoges* (Vendée), *Bazouges* (Ille-et-Vilaine, Mayenne, Sarthe), *Bazauges* (Charente-Inférieure), *la Bazoge* (Manche, Mayenne, Sarthe), *la Bazouge* (Mayenne), as well as *la Bazeuge* (Haute-Vienne), etc. (Longnon, 1923, p.337-340)

However, after the Roman invasion, known as the Great Germanic Invasion, religious names declined. During this period, the process of clearing land from forest strips accelerated, and newly created plots were assigned topographically descriptive names or the names of the landowners.

It was only after the Frankish period and the spread of Christianity that religious toponyms began to reappear. After Christianity took root in Gaul at the twilight of the Roman Empire, a large number of toponyms emerged, the oldest of which dates back about 400 years. Religious toponyms, which began to form during the Frankish period, became more widespread with the development of the feudal period. Initially, names of churches were given to settlements around them, and later, names of saints became more preferred (Dauzat, 1951).

In those times, there were many cultic buildings: from temples to cathedrals, from monasteries to abbeys. Terms such as *chapelle* (small chapel), *église* (church), *celle* (interior of a temple), *basilique* (basilica), *oratoire* (monastery) were successively used to denote places of worship.

French toponyms based on religious terms, which in turn come from Latin names: *cella* (small monastery) - *La Celle*, *Cellieu*; *ecclesia* (church) - *Eglisolles*; *cappella* (chapel) - *La Capelle*, *Capelle-les-Hesdin*. Some toponyms come from the word *God* (Dieu) - *Villedieu*, *Dieulouard*, *Dieuze*.

But the overwhelming majority of toponyms of

religious origin are based on the names of saints. The most commonly used names are Saint-Martin (Le Ban-Saint-Martin, La Capelle Saint-Martin, Saint-Martin-au-Bosc, Saint-Martin-Chateau, Saint-Martin-Choquel, Saint-Martin-Curton, etc.), Germain (Saint-Germain-des-Pres, Saint-Germain-d'Esteuil, Saint-Germain-des-Vaux, Saint-Germain-de-Varreville, Saint-Germain-du-Bois, etc.), Maurice (Saint-Maurice-de-Gourdans, Saint-Maurice-de-Lestapel, Saint-Maurice-de-Remens, Saint-Maurice-des-Champs, etc.), and others.

Since religious terms are widely used in French toponyms, the most common representatives of toponymic phrases can be described by models such as: La Capelle Saint-Martin, Saint-Martin-Choquel, Saint-Germain-des-Vaux, Saint-Germain-du-Bois, Saint-Maurice-de-Remens, etc. (Deroy, 1994).

Toponyms derived from the names of saints and religious figures are called hagiotoponyms in French. The term comes from the Greek *hagios* ("holy"), *topos* ("place"), and *ónuma*, a dialectical variant of *ónoma* ("name"): a geographical name associated with the name of a saint and, accordingly, with religion. In France, hagiotoponyms are more commonly found in the commune of Réunion.

Hagiotoponyms are divided into the following groups:

1. Saint's name: Val-Saint-Lambert (Liège, Belgium) – a place named after Saint Lambert.
2. Religious holiday: Christ à Pâques, Grand Pardon (Yom Kippur) – places named after religious celebrations.
3. From God: La Trinité-sur-Mer (Morbihan) – a place associated with the Holy Trinity.
4. Church: Cathédrale Saint-Pierre, Basilique Saint-Michel, Cathédrale Sainte-Croix – places named after saints or religious figures and linked to churches or basilicas.
5. From a monastery: Saint-Sauveur-en-Rue, Saint-Rambert-en-Bugey, Saint-Vincent (Chantelle) – places associated with monasteries.
6. From pilgrimage: Boulogne-Billancourt (Hauts-de-Seine) – a place associated with pilgrimage.
7. Relics: Aix-la-Chapelle – a place connected with relics.

As a result of the significant development of this system of expression during the feudal period, today one in eight communes in France bears the name of a saint. In the early 20th century, out of 36,170 communes, 4,450 were named after a saint, of which 3,550 were located in the Occitan province, particularly in the Central Massif. Today, 29% of communes in Ardèche and 27% in Dordogne are agiotoponyms (toponyms formed using the names of saints).

During the feudal period, the word *Sanctus* gradually replaced *dominus*, which had lost its meaning of "saint." This change occurred initially in newly formed names and gradually spread to all place names.

In addition to widely revered saints, there are also places named after local saints: St-Genies and St-Tropez, Saints of the South, Saints Basle, Evre and Nabor, Saints of the East, Saints Cast, Guénolé, Jacut, and Renan, Breton Saints, or Norman St-Vigor; Saints-Dié-des-Vosges (from the Latin *Deodatus*, bishop of Nevers, hermit of Vosges in the 7th century).

However, the phonetics of the regions influenced the names of saints, just as they did with all words, resulting in the saints' names being pronounced in various forms:

- Saturninus (bishop of Toulouse, died in 257), Saint-Sornin (Allier, Charente, Corrèze (then 238, now 242 communes), Vendée), Saint-Sorlin (Ain, Isère, Rhône, Savoie), Saint-Sernin (Ardèche, Aude, Aveyron), Saint-Savournin (Bouches-du-Rhône);
- Cyricus (the name of two 6th-century martyrs), Saint-Cirgues (Haute-Loire), Saint-Ciergues (Haute-Marne), Saint-Ciers-d'Abzac (Gironde), Saint-Cir (Dordogne), Saint-Chartre (Vienne), Sancerques (Cher);
- Sanctus Satyrus (the name of the abbey is confirmed as Sancerre (Cher) in 1034).

Among the toponyms derived from religious names, a special place is occupied by those derived from the names of religious figures and warriors who participated in the Crusades to the Holy Land. Examples include Oliver (Loiret), Lolif (from *l'olif* – Mount of Olives – Manche), Montabot (Manche), le Mont Thabor en Galilée, Montcauvire (Sainte-Maritime), le Mont du Calvaire in Jerusalem, Bithaine (Haute-Saône), where the biblical name Béthanie appears, and finally, as the name suggests, Vitry-le-Croisé (Aube). (Lejeune, 2002, p. 82-95).

"Religion," without a doubt, acted on its own, but it also allowed natural, political, economic, and social factors to play a role around it. These factors intervened in the evolution of a given territory and, over the centuries, led to continuous changes in the nomenclature of settlements. While it is proven that in the struggle for influence, many saints' names replaced older terms, secular names also contributed to the disappearance of church-related names. Names of the same origin fought and displaced each other. The battle continues in front of our eyes, and every day we witness the issuance of decrees that sanction, through "renaming," real changes in the centers of municipalities (Seabra, 2006).

To confirm the automatism of the process, it is enough to note that in the Middle Ages, even in places where the prestige of a saint seemed to immediately impose the hagiographical term, locations like Saint-Denis, Saint-Omer, and Saint-Antoine, for example, long hesitated between the old and the new toponym. Both forms were used in texts simultaneously until the most prominent element of the combination managed to secure spiritual and material superiority, pushing the other into the background. Furthermore, it is important to note once again that the presence of a sanctuary was, most of the time, a miraculous element of growth and movement in

a place. The life it brought there became the foundation for unforeseen consequences, where the name itself no longer held significance (Lavergne, 1929, pp. 177-202).

Recommendations.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to further enhance the understanding and documentation of toponyms derived from religious origins in the French language:

1. Development of Comprehensive Toponymic Databases

There is a need for the creation and expansion of detailed digital databases dedicated to religiously motivated toponyms in French. Such databases should include etymological analyses, historical references, and semantic classifications, allowing researchers to access and analyze linguistic and cultural data systematically.

2. Inclusion in Educational Curricula Given the cultural and historical significance of religious toponyms, it is recommended that elements of toponymy – particularly those tied to religion – be incorporated into secondary and higher education curricula in the fields of linguistics, geography, and history. This would promote greater awareness of the cultural heritage embedded in place names (Karimli et al., 2025, p. 151).

3. Preservation of Endangered Toponyms

In the context of globalization and linguistic homogenization, many traditional place names – especially those with religious connotations – are at risk of being altered or forgotten. National and regional institutions should support initiatives aimed at preserving these names through official recognition, public awareness campaigns, and integration into cultural heritage programs.

4. Comparative Studies Across Language Areas

Future research should pursue comparative analyses between French religious toponyms and those of other Romance languages (e.g., Italian, Spanish, Portuguese), as well as those from non-European linguistic traditions. Such studies would contribute to a broader understanding of universal patterns and unique cultural expressions in religious toponymy.

Conclusions.

From the conducted study, it can be concluded that one of the two interesting issues related to the names of saints was their geographical distribution. Due to the widespread nature of the same cult, the names of some saints can be found throughout France.

Christianity, primarily Catholicism, has had a constant and significant influence on the formation of French toponyms. The influence of Protestantism on the formation of place names coincides with modern times. In France, toponyms formed under the influence of other religions are very rare; for example, the toponym Baigneux-les-Juifs (Côte d'Or - Golden Coast, 1391) is the only name of a commune in France.

Names associated with religion began to appear during the Frankish period and were further developed in the feudal period. It was during this period that most modern toponyms were formed and stabilized.

From a historical perspective, studying the emergence of religious names leads to the conclusion that their origins date back to ancient times, and the etymological analysis of each name always required long and complex research.

Thus, the study of the origin of religious names is a lengthy and complex research task, and the results of the analysis conducted in this field can provide valuable insights for future toponymic studies.

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